

The Temptation of Jesus Christ (Article)

"If You are the Son of God," he said, "throw Yourself down. For it is written: 'He will command His angels concerning You, and they will lift You up in their hands, so that You will not strike Your foot against a stone.'" Jesus replied, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"
Matthew 4:6-7 (BSB)

Introduction:

The Temptation of Jesus Christ, as seen in the above verse, is an event, unparalleled in history. In fact, Jesus' encounter with Satan (the devil) stands above any similar records, such as are found in the Old Testament, intertestamental literature, rabbinic literature or the Dead Sea Scrolls. (1) Found throughout the Bible, God often tests the faith of people (Abraham in Genesis 22:1; Job in Job 23:10; Hezekiah in 2 Chronicles 32:31) and - while not tempting anyone Himself - God, sometimes, allows Satan to tempt individuals (Job 1-2), but is *never* the cause of evil: Jesus Christ faces *both* God's testing and Satan's temptation. (2) But Why?

The following is an investigation to provide some answers to this question. Jesus' wilderness temptation - following his baptism - is recorded in all three so-called 'Synoptic Gospels' (Mark 1:12-13; Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13) and is, as will be seen, a demonstration of Christ's readiness to defeat Satan and sin, as our unique, sinless Savior. (3)

At once the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness, and He was there for forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and the angels ministered to Him.

Mark 1:12-13 (BSB)

Commentary:

Beginning with the Gospel of Mark - the shortest of all records about Jesus' temptation - we nevertheless have the basic elements also contained in Matthew and Luke. As we can see here, right after His baptism, the Holy Spirit leads Jesus "into the wilderness" (v.12) to prepare Him, as Jesus is tested by Satan "for forty days" (v.13) - symbolic of Old Testament saints struggling in the desert, such as Moses in Exodus 24:18 and Elijah in 1 Kings

19:8, 15 - and also as analogy of Israel's testing and preparation (forty years in the wilderness): However, where Israel often failed, due to disobedience and being unfaithful, Jesus succeeds (which we learn about in more detail in Matthew and Luke). (4)

The point here is that Jesus is dealing with a real enemy, namely Satan (the enemy of God and our enemy, too), which continues on as Jesus deals repeatedly with fallen angels ('demons' in Mark 1:24, 27, 34 and Satan himself, as recorded in the Gospels) - the severity of Satan's attack to tempt Jesus can be seen by "angels" ministering to Him (v.13) - which sets the stage for us to understand the reality of the spiritual struggle between Satan and God, a battle of cosmic dimensions, and eschatological implications for the end time, when Satan is eternally defeated (Revelation 20:10).

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, He was hungry. The tempter came to Him and said, "If You are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." But Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Then the devil took Him to the holy city and set Him on the pinnacle of the temple. "If You are the Son of God," he said, "throw Yourself down. For it is written: 'He will command His angels concerning You, and they will lift You up in their hands, so that You will not strike Your foot against a stone.'" Jesus replied, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. "All this I will give You," he said, "if You will fall down and worship me." "Away from Me, Satan!" Jesus declared. "For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve Him only.'" Then the devil left Him, and angels came and ministered to Him.

Matthew 4:1-11 (BSB)

Commentary:

More detailed than Mark, Matthew's account shows us the nature of Satan's temptations and how Jesus responds to each of them. In the first temptation, the devil tries to command Jesus to tell stones to become bread (v.3), since the devil recognizes Jesus as God's Son, (a better translation, instead of "if," can be "Since you are the Son of God...") - Satan is trying to get Jesus *not* to do God's will. (6)

We should take careful note, of *how* Jesus defends Himself here. Christ's main and only weapon here is Scripture, which Jesus uses by quoting the Old Testament, that is Deuteronomy (8:3 - first temptation; 6:16 - second temptation; 6:13 - third temptation) to refute the "tempter" (Satan), thus in this first case Jesus says: "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God,'" (v.4) - and in the second case, the devil himself quotes Scripture (Psalm 91:11-12), yet misapplies it. (7)

We see here the importance of God's Word, as defensive weapon for all believers, when used appropriately and in context, just as Jesus does in His last refute of the devil (v.10) in which we realize that it is Christ who is in charge, as He commands the devil to leave "Away from Me, Satan!" This is important, because even though Jesus is 'God in the Flesh,' He also shares in our own human limitations, seen here when Matthew records that "he was hungry" (v.2) which shows the reality of his physical weakness, and as He defends Himself against the devil's temptations, through the power of God's Word - His defeat of Satan, lines up, with the needs and God's provision and care, since "angels came and ministered to him" (v.11). (8)

Then Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days He was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and when they had ended, He was hungry. The devil said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread." But Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone.'" Then the devil led Him up to a high place and showed Him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. "I will give You authority over all these kingdoms and all their glory," he said. "For it has been relinquished to me, and I can give it to anyone I wish. So if You worship me, it will all be Yours." But Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve Him only.'" Then the devil led Him to Jerusalem and set Him on the pinnacle of the temple. "If You are the Son of God," he said, "throw Yourself down from here. For it is written: 'He will command His angels concerning You to guard You carefully; and they will lift You up in their hands, so that You will not strike Your foot against a stone.'" But Jesus answered, "It also says, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished every temptation, he left Him until an opportune time.

Luke 4:1-13 (BSB)

Commentary:

Luke's account of Jesus' temptation is similar to Matthew, but here the order of the last two temptations is reversed, a chronological sequence is not in view here (9), and there are other details not found in Matthew. For example, we are told that Jesus "returned from the Jordan" (v.1) but the exact location of the temptation is not mentioned, and remains unknown. (10)

What matters here, as we follow along the events, is that it is the Holy Spirit and not the devil who initiates the conflict Jesus faces ("led by the Spirit" in v.1) revealing God's sovereignty and control over all events that transpire (11) - and explaining Jesus' sinlessness, since it is only Jesus (and only Him) who resists all temptations faithfully. (12)

The term 'devil' is a Greek translation of the Hebrew word 'Satan' emphasizing the supernatural (yet real) existence of this fallen angel. (13) Like in Matthew's account, the first temptation of our Lord is the same, and Jesus defends Himself by using the Scriptures ("it is written" in v.4, v.8 and "it also says" in v.12) - which reminds us as believers, to arm ourselves using the "sword of the Spirit" (Ephesians 6:17) just as Jesus does, when we are tempted. (14)

The second temptation in Luke (v.5-7), is possibly a visionary experience, in which the devil refers to himself, to Jesus, but at no point to God, so here we see that the devil claims to have an authority, and yet it is not equal to God's authority, since it is God in His divine sovereignty who allows Satan to operate, within God-given boundaries. (15)

The third temptation, which points to Christ's journey and destiny in Jerusalem ("the devil led him to Jerusalem" in v.9) relates to the Jerusalem temple. (16) it is here, that we see how Jesus remains in God's will and does not give in to temptation, but resists the devil in obedience to God: So, coupled with the foregoing genealogy of Jesus (Luke 3:23-38) two analogies are developed, namely, the contrast between Jesus and Adam, as well as Jesus and Israel - Jesus succeeds where Adam failed (Genesis 3), likewise Jesus succeeds where the Israelites failed (Exodus 4:22-23; Psalm 95:8-11). (17)

Note, that the contrast between the first Adam and Jesus as the second Adam, supposedly appears in 1 John 2:16 (18) - however, this is inconclusive, since the temptations Jesus faces are all messianic in nature, which means they are unique to Jesus' temptations as God's Son. (19) What matters most is that Jesus was truly tempted, and yet He remained obedient to God in all of them.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who was tempted in every way that we are, yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Hebrews 4:15-16 (BSB)

Conclusion:

So, what are we to make of all this? While in the intertestamental period some Jews believed that in some way or another, Satan had gained control over the earth, Jesus' victory - after being tempted by Satan - reveals the falsehood of such beliefs. (20) Jesus succeeds where all others have failed.

Why did God let Jesus be tested? For one, this reveal *who* He is (God's Son) and *why* he came (to accomplish His Messianic servant mission to atone for our sins) (21), and triumph over sin, Satan, evil on the cross, following His resurrection and ascension. Another reason, for Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is God demonstrating Jesus' sinlessness, since the nature of Satan's temptations is for Jesus to compromise and possibly avoid the suffering on the cross, and hard path ahead of Him. (22)

Could Jesus have sinned? This question can be affirmatively answered with 'No,' since even though Satan's temptations are genuine, geared towards the human side of Jesus - the union of Christ's human and divine natures in His person, enabled Him not to sin. (23) In other words, part of God's purpose for allowing Jesus to be tempted, is to reveal that Christ could not sin - this means that Christ, in His deity, exercised full authority over His humanity (John 10:18). (24) Note, that even though Christ in His divinity always does the Father's will (John 5:19, 30), this is not without a struggle, given His sinless human nature, as we see when Jesus prays in Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-45; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:39-46). (25)

Lastly, we learn from Jesus' temptation that God is absolutely sovereign, and never allows any temptation, unless it furthers His sovereignly designed plan and purpose. (26) Specifically, Satan approaches Jesus in ways that are not always immediately recognizable as diabolic and evil, since having food to eat (first temptation) is a real human need - and yet, each and every enticement is deceptive, since given his nature, all the devil can ever do is evil, since he is God's (and our) adversary. (27)

Most importantly, Satan (ab)uses God's Word, as seen here, and as seen in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:1). In this way, we realize that one of the main strategies of the devil is to get us to doubt God, not trusting in God and His perfect plan, purpose and timing - the same thing Satan does when testing Jesus in the wilderness.

As Christians, we are called to emulate Jesus, in that we not only trust in Him, but especially in His Word (the Bible) - a good example being the church in Berea (Acts 17:11) - knowing God's Word and spending as much time as we can in the Bible, since the devil also knows Scripture. (28)

Imitating Christ, as the Holy Spirit enables us, helps us remain obedient to God. Also, surrendering to God, that is to Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and Savior in *prayer* (29), alongside immersing ourselves in Scripture, is found in the 'Lord's Prayer' (which Christ provides for us): "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." (Matthew 6:13). Amen.

Notes

- (1) Edwards, James R. *The Gospel According to Luke. Pilar New Testament Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015., p.99.
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- (3) Agan, Jimmy. *Luke: A 12-Week Study*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2015., p.19.
- (4) Longman, Tremper, David E. Garland, D. A. Carson, Walter W. Wessel, and Mark L. Strauss. *Matthew & Mark*. Rev. ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010., p.708.

(5) Longman, Tremper, David E. Garland, D. A. Carson, Walter W. Wessel, and Mark L. Strauss. *Matthew & Mark*. Rev. ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010., p.708.

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May God bless you and keep you.

Pastor John

Amen.